

Surviving the Holidays After SIDS

—by Peggy Crane

All my life I have dearly loved all holidays. I enjoyed the planning, decorating, family gatherings, and presents. By the time my eldest daughter, Danielle, was about two years old she was a full-fledged holiday lover, too.

In the Spring of 1990 I found out that I was pregnant with my second child and that the baby was due on Christmas Day. Since we had been trying to get pregnant for quite a while, I was ecstatic with the news. The additional bonus of having a Christmas baby only added to my joy. Particularly in the last few weeks of my pregnancy I enjoyed going to church and listening to the familiar Christmas stories full of reminders that a very special baby was about to be born. It was very special to me to rehear the historical accounts of the anticipation of Jesus' birth at a time when my mind was so full of thoughts about the impending arrival of my own baby. Maegan was born just four days before Christmas. Her one and only Christmas was a beautiful, peaceful day for all of us.

After Maegan died of SIDS at the age of four months, I found myself dreading all holidays. Every special occasion was a sorrowful reminder of the beloved child that was no longer with us. Since Maegan's first birthday and our first Christmas without her came all at once, this was an especially painful time.

For the sake of my sanity, and to keep the wondrous joy of the holiday season alive in Danielle, who was then five, I sought advice from friends who had suffered similar losses and I read articles on the subject. The following is a summary of the information that I found to be the most helpful:

Be easy on yourself. The holidays will most likely be difficult for you—don't be alarmed if you find yourself crying without warning. If you can accept these facts, it may help you relax a little bit. Do attend whatever gatherings you most want to go to but don't force yourself to accept every invitation. Trying to cope with the loss of your child takes enough energy without burdening yourself with a lot of social obligations.

Prioritize your holiday rituals. This may be a good time for you to take stock of the activities you do each year and weed out those that you no longer feel inclined to do. For example, if holiday baking is something you dread, look for a place to buy your holiday goodies or consider swapping with friends. Or, just because you don't have the energy for an elaborate list of Christmas cards this year doesn't mean that you can't resume sending holiday cards next year if you feel more able.

Find a new place to celebrate the holidays. I am so thankful that a friend suggested that we break from tradition and spend our first Christmas after Maegan's death away from home. We rented a cabin in the mountains for Maegan's birthday until the day after Christmas. Being in neutral surroundings allowed us to focus on our immediate family, away from the pressures of our well-meaning family and friends. The mountain setting was so peaceful and beautiful that it helped to remind us of the joys of life.

Do something special to commemorate your beloved baby. Many people find that it makes them feel better to make a financial contribution to a charity in loving memory of their baby. You might want to suggest to family members that they take the money they would have spent on a gift for your child and make a charitable contribution. Some people like to buy a toy or clothing that they feel their own child would have enjoyed and donate it to a children's charity. Among other traditions in our home, Santa always leaves a special present for Maegan's family and we provide the altar flowers for our church on the Sunday when the children's Christmas pageant is presented.

Do keep an open line of communication with friends and family about how you are feeling. These times can be very awkward for those around us. Many people avoid mentioning your loss, for fear it will make you feel worse. It will most likely be easier for everyone if you bring up the subject and discuss your feelings openly. I think that this is particularly important on the days that are unique to you and your baby such as their birthday and the anniversary of their death. Over and over, I have heard people say that they were thinking of us on these special days but they were afraid to call or to bring up the subject.



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